

The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again.—Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”

It is widely acknowledged that the new media technologies of the late twentieth century brought change. New forms of access to information, new social relationships, and new kinds of community are all emerging through the mediated terms of the internet. But what of the relationship to the past? What is the image that our contemporary moment makes visible, and what insights might it yield? This special issue addresses these questions. The essays we have included did not set out to illuminate that question. They did not emerge from a call for papers. The issue is the result of an accidental convergence, if indeed there is such a thing, of six essays that were all ready for publication at roughly the same time and that suggested a theme we have sought to convey in our title: “Technologies of Enslavement and Liberty.”

The influence of new media technologies on the study of the past has been radical. Describing the most obvious change, Cathy N. Davidson remembers the microfilm reader that she dubbed “the Green Monster” and considers the proliferation of databases that have democratized research as they have yielded unprecedented access to information formerly available only to scholars with proximity, or who could afford to travel, to the relevant archives.¹ The change is conceptual as well. New media technologies alter the way we interact with, and

therefore experience, the world. Materially and conceptually, those on and off the grid alike are part of a networked society.

Understanding the social world as a network entails a shift from the concepts of social position and social spaces to a more dynamic and relational model of society with an accompanying change in how we think about agency. Determinative social hierarchies are accordingly replaced by the concept of nodes in a configuration of overlapping interactions and interrelations. Figures who occupy these social nodes are known in social psychology as carriers, and like their epidemiological counterparts, they have an agency that is no less important for not being intentional: carriers produce outcomes because of their connective role in the network. Networks are constantly shifting, and persons do not always occupy nodal positions, but anyone has the potential to do so. This shift to relational thinking dramatizes important features of agency that are obscured by conventional (spatial and hierarchical) ways of understanding social position.

If, as we are suggesting, this relational thinking registers a paradigm shift, we hasten to add that we do not believe that networks, relational thinking, or, for that matter, such paradigm shifts in general represent a radical reorganization of the world. Rather, they suggest a shift in focus. With that change, the past flashes up, as Benjamin puts it, enabling a moment of recognition—a new perspective—before the next shift in turn produces its own fleeting glimpse. There is no question that our contemporary information technologies have not only produced new means and forms of social interactions but have also underscored the need to conceptualize those interactions and the communities they constitute in new ways. The questions we are addressing in this issue concern the impact of those changes on the work we do as scholars of American literature, since, as our epigraph from Benjamin suggests, our past is as ever changing as our present.

Such changes, of course, are familiar to students of literature who over time have watched not only trends, but texts themselves metamorphose with new archival discoveries, media, social and geopolitical formations, generations of critics and critical theories, and even, as T. S. Eliot noted nearly a century ago, with the appearance of new works themselves. At present, networks are intertwined with the transnational turn that, in recent years, has challenged students of American literature to consider the correspondence between the

national boundaries suggested by the name of the field and the reading practices that we bring to our objects of study. Both terms of our titular object of study—American Literature—have undergone considerable transformation since the foundation of this journal in 1929. Essays on film noir or Cuban literature, for example, would not have found their way into this journal during its earliest decades, and with such changes in content come changes in approach.

Within the fields of American literature, the antebellum period was the last to show the impact of the transnational turn, which is not surprising since the nineteenth century witnessed the consolidation of the modern nation-state, and with it the emergence of institutions—among them “American literature”—that expressed and disseminated its ideologies. In the early twentieth century, the first articulations of a canon of “American literature” accordingly returned to the antebellum period. The exciting new critical work on this period that has emerged in recent years registers the conceptual changes that the geographical and new media orientations have wrought. The networks produced by new technologies of travel and communication, by movements and migrations, and by the circulation of goods and services are not new in the present moment, of course. Rather, the contemporary interest in networks has prompted scholars to attend to their expression in the past, deepening our insight into both moments, and, as Benjamin suggests, their conjunction.

Taking the Haitian Revolution as a nodal point in the networks of the nineteenth century, for example, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot does in his 1995 *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, reorients the nineteenth century.² The historical narrative that emerges brings a new lens through which to view how institutions and relationships in the antebellum United States were contorted by the pressure of refusing to confront the events that underscored the contradictions at the heart of the Enlightenment doctrine of the “rights of man.” That perspective is the focus of this special issue.

We chose *technologies* for our title because we saw these essays speaking to one another across a common interest in organizational techniques—ranging from new visual technologies to legal cases, genres, historical and literary narratives, and visual and rhetorical vocabularies—through which freedom and enslavement were articulated in the antebellum period. Our use of technologies is informed by

Martin Heidegger's formulation from "The Question Concerning Technology," in which technology is revealing and challenging. For Heidegger, the challenges of technology work through *Ge-stell* (Enframing), which both produces and illuminates the experience of estrangement. The technologies engaged by the essays in this issue are distorted as they conceal the contradictions between an ideology of freedom on which personal agency is predicated (with its attendant metaphors of enslavement) and the materiality of the institution of slavery—a permeating slave culture—in the antebellum United States. Those distortions, in turn, bring to light ("unconceal") the contradictions and the obscured relationships that foster the concealment.³

The first three essays of the issue show how the law at once articulates contradictory notions of personhood and manifests the strain of the effort to conceal the contradictions. In their concepts of "enslaved mobility" (Edlie Wong), the instability of "legal personhood" (Jeanine Marie DeLombard), and "partial subjectivity" (Andrea Stone), all three illustrate the flexible terms of nodal agency that we have identified as characteristic of the shift from the stasis of social position and hierarchy to the fluidity of network nodes. The enslaved travelers in Wong's "'Freedom with a Vengeance': Choosing Kin in Antislavery Literature and Law" encountered the contradictory geographies, legal coordinates, and terms of agency that characterized the nation at midcentury. As Wong shows, nothing more fully demonstrated those contradictions or displayed the legal contortions as the courts sought to reconcile or obscure them than the freedom suits that abolitionists undertook on behalf of enslaved persons.

If Wong considers the race, gender, and geographies of freedom, DeLombard is interested in the "temporal dimensions of unfreedom": the impossibility of documenting the moment of transformation from subjection to autonomy. In "Salvaging Legal Personhood: Melville's *Benito Cereno*," she links the subjective oscillations characteristic of the institution of slavery to the temporal fluctuations of legal and literary narratives of enslavement (not, as in *Moby-Dick*, "who aint a slave?" but "*when ain't one a slave?*"). For Stone, the "shifting legal subject-positions" of enslaved women who suffered (the all-too-frequent) sexual abuse at the hands of their masters enabled the legitimate operation of "systems of terror." Her essay, "Interracial Sexual Abuse and Legal Subjectivity in Antebellum Law and Literature," considers how enslaved women manipulated genre—from crime fiction

and the seduction novel to the confessional and testimonial—to tell their stories in ways that exposed the legal paradox.

While Stone sees the legacy of their use of genre in the courtroom in the unique characteristics of the female-authored slave narrative, Sarah Blackwood demonstrates how the development of photographic technologies contributed to the documentary demands placed on authors of slave narratives. Her essay, “Fugitive Obscura: Runaway Slave Portraiture and Early Photographic Technology,” traces a double exposure, showing how racism troubled the objectivity claims of photography and, in turn, how photography exposed the dynamics of racism. Authors of slave narratives drew on visual imagery to depict the limits of unmediated representation.

Frederick Douglass’s use of genre as a technology is the subject of Lance Newman’s “Free Soil and the Abolitionist Forests of Frederick Douglass’s ‘The Heroic Slave.’” While forests in the 1845 *Narrative* represent the nearly impassable boundary between enslavement and freedom, Douglass articulated a protoenvironmentalist critique of capitalism in 1853 in “The Heroic Slave” as he sought to broaden the appeal of abolitionism in concert with the goals of the Free Soil party. Newman dubs Douglass’s text a “republican pastoral” to mark how he uses genre to meditate on the relationship between the exploitation of nature and of people and to define emancipation through access to arable land.

While swamps exemplify wilderness spaces of transformation that facilitate self-emancipation in Newman’s essay, Andy Doolen identifies a radical and critical tradition of geographic and temporal confusion associated with such spaces. Yet even the swamps cannot fully elude the appropriative revolutionary ideology that can make the slave rebel at best “a martyr for unrequited American liberty.” In “‘Be Cautious of the Word *Rebel*’: Race, Revolution, and Transnational History in Martin Delany’s *Blake; or, The Huts of America*,” Doolen treats historiography itself as a technology, and the pressures of the insufficiently repressed institution of slavery distort even the reception of Martin Delany’s serialized tale. As Doolen shows, the contemporary networks of the transnational turn generate a new reading both of Delany’s hero, whose departure for Cuba is a precondition of his bid for freedom, and of his serialized publication, which Doolen reads as an exceptional analysis of how slavery corrupts at the level of language and culture.

In the passage that follows the excerpt from “Theses on the Philosophy of History” that we have taken for our epigraph, Walter Benjamin elaborates that “to articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was.’ It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.”⁴ Such moments, for Benjamin, were also moments of possibility: the opportunity to see the past offer the conditions of possibility that enable us to see the nature of the danger in the present. That is, we believe, the nature of technologies of scholarship.

Notes

- 1 Cathy N. Davidson, “Humanities 2.0: Promise, Perils, Predictions,” *PMLA* 123 (May 2008): 709.
- 2 Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995). Other works that have taken the Haitian Revolution as a nodal point to offer new readings of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries include Susan Buck-Morss, “Hegel and Haiti,” *Critical Inquiry* 26 (summer 2000): 821–65; Sybille Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 2004); and Monique Allewaert, “Swamp Sublime: Ecologies of Resistance in the American Plantation Zone,” *PMLA* 123 (March 2008): 340–57.
- 3 Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 1–35.
- 4 Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 255.